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SPY CASE IS CALLED THREAT TO FINDING SOVIET SUBMARINES

REVISIONS MAY BE NEEDED

Experts Stress It's Too Soon
to Say What Steps May Be
Needed for Security

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WASHINGTON, June 5—Submarine experts said today that as a result of the Walker family spy case the Navy might have to rebuild portions of the undersea network of sound-detectors that are a crucial early warning system against a Soviet nuclear attack.

Some experts, including former Navy officers, said replacing the Sound Surveillance System, called Sossus, was potentially one of the difficult and costly measures that might be needed to restore confidence in the American submarine fleet's command of the seas, if the allegations of a 20-year spy network prove true.

The Navy itself has not completed its appraisal of what steps might be

needed to compensate for security breaches that may have resulted from the purported spy ring. Experts interviewed today stressed that it was too early to be sure what countermeasures would be required.

Possible Exaggeration of Damage

Navy spokesmen, citing the confidential nature of investigations by the Justice Department and a Navy intelligence team, declined to comment on the case.

In interviews today, experts in Navy affairs said they believed reports so far of possible military damage from the purported spy ring might have been exaggerated.

Several experts said the worst danger would be if the Soviet Union had gained information that would help

them track American submarines carrying ballistic missiles. The submarines are considered the least vulnerable portion of America's nuclear arsenal.

Access to Recent Data Doubtful

The experts said they believed none of the suspects arrested so far in the case had access to information involving the submarines that was recent. The submarines operate under a command independent of non-nuclear Navy forces and with a separate communications network.

So far, the experts said, the only suspect with experience aboard submarines carrying nuclear missiles was John A. Walker Jr. His experience in the 1960's as a radioman aboard two submarines carrying Polaris-class missiles, experts said, would probably have provided him access to only limited information of value to the Russians.

The Polaris class of vessel was succeeded by Poseidon submarines, which are now being replaced by Trident submarines. A number of Polaris submarines are still in service, but they have undergone extensive modernization.

Stansfield Turner, a retired admiral and former Director of Central Intelligence, said today: "My alarm focuses on John Walker and his experience in the ballistic missile submarine force."

But Admiral Turner said Mr. Walker would probably have had access to little information that would threaten more modern submarines. "It isn't going to make our subs totally vulnerable tomorrow," he said.

Force Still 'Silent on Patrol'

A former submarine commander with wide experience in the Pentagon and the shipbuilding industry, who spoke on condition that he not be named, said in an interview: "I can't picture any serious loss of strategic submarine security. That's a totally isolated command, and I think rightfully so."

Dr. Harlan K. Ullman, a former Navy officer and Pentagon consultant, said "it's my understanding" that the ballistic-missile submarine force "remains silent on patrol."

"John Walker may have had access to operational details with a very short half-life," Dr. Ullman said, "but I think the damage has been greatly exaggerated."

Nonetheless, several experts said they assumed that, because of the Walker case, the Navy had changed the travel patterns of the submarines and had altered codes and radio frequencies.

Several submarine experts with experience in the Navy and in the shipbuilding industry said they believed the gravest possibility posed by the Walker case was that the Soviet Union learned details about the Navy's ability to detect Soviet submarines, including sonar systems on American ships and the Sossus listening devices.

Deduction of Weak Points

In the 1950's and 1960's, the United States draped chains of sound-sensitive devices, called hydrophones, along the sea bottom and on the continental shelf at key points separating Soviet ports from the open seas.

According to several submarine experts, if the Soviet Union had access to many years of Navy communications reports on Russian submarine movements, it may have been able to deduce the weak points in this network.

More important, the experts said, the Russians may have been able to compute the sensitivity of these undersea microphones. By traveling at a slower speed, producing less noise, they might then be able to sneak quietly by the Sossus system.

Soviet submarines therefore might be able to move from safe harbors into open sea to mass for war without being detected, giving an added element of surprise to an attack, experts said.

One intelligence source said some Navy officers had long suspected, from watching changes in Soviet submarine movements, that the Russians had access to inside information. But Navy officials have debated for years whether the Russians' information came from a close reading of published technical data, or from spies.

"If the Navy has got enough indicators that the Soviets are doing things a little too smart, then they better start putting their hydrophones in different places," said a submarine expert who participated in the placement of the current Sossus sensors.

One intelligence source said relocating the Sossus sensors "would be an enormously expensive move" and would be difficult to do secretly because the Soviet Union has vastly improved its satellite surveillance abilities.

Rear Adm. Gene R. LaRocque, a retired expert in antisubmarine warfare who now directs the Center for Defense Information, a private research group that is often critical of the Reagan Administration, said he doubted such a drastic step as replacing the system would be necessary.

More Sensors for 'Blind Areas'

But he said the Navy might need to add more sensors to some "blind areas."

"The Soviets know where some of the sensors are already," Admiral LaRocque said. "They know it exists."

But he said that if it became clear the spy ring had given away the precise detection abilities of the sensor network, the Navy might need newer, more sensitive devices.

"The best kept secret in the Navy is the capability of our Sossus system to detect Soviet submarines in various modes of operation and in various locations," he said.